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ABSTRACT

Empathic listening is central to almost all human communication processes. "Feeling with" another is the heart of empathic listening: it includes a cognitive understanding of what the other is communicating plus a sensitivity to their state of emotion. One possible approach to utilize in the teaching of empathic listening is to begin a general unit on "Communication and Feelings." In designing such a unit, teachers should use activities which promote students getting in touch with themselves, develop exercises which push students to locate the "feeling source," and make important points about feelings during these exercises. Teachers should provide students with basic guidelines about the nature of emotions: (1) emotions serve as a monitoring system; (2) locating the feeling source is helpful in finding solutions; (3) feelings are not good or bad--they just are; (4) feelings are present in all transactions--work on listening for them; (5) the way people think results in feelings; (6) the student should own and trust his/her feelings; (7) the student should report feelings rather than act them out or hold them in; (8) most people need to increase their "feeling word" vocabulary; (9) the student should acknowledge the content and feelings of his or her partner. Exercises provide students with consistent practice and application of empathic listening skills. (Sixteen references are attached.) (SR)

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TEACHING EMPATHIC LISTENING

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TEACHING EMPATHIC LISTENING

In spite of the fact that the construct of empathy can be traced back to the age of Plato and Aristotle (Parella, pp. 205-206), it was not actively recognized in communication theory until the 1960's. (Arnett, p. 369) In 1970 Kelly expressed concern for the amazingly consistent lack of emphasis on the listening component of the communication process and especially empathic listening. (Kelly, p. 350) Arnett and Nakagawa noted in their 1983 search of professional speech communication journals that they found no articles primarily focused on empathic listening. (Arnett, p.376) Bruneau echoes these observations and concerns when he points out that the concept of empathy has been given only "scant attention" in the communication literature. He states:

> "In light of its centrality and importance to almost all human communication processes, especially listening, the concept has been inadequately treated or even neglected. Despite the importance of empathy, it is common to find it not mentioned at all or to find only a sentecnce or paragraph on the concept in communication textbooks or theoretical discourses." (Bruneau, p. 1)

Overview of Listening Education

Like empathy, interest in the art of listening can be traced to ancient thinkers and writers. A noteable example is Plutarch's "On Listening to Lectures"--a fairly comprehensive examination of listening skills in public speaking situations nearly 2,000 years ago! (Plutarch) For over two decades following Paul Rankin's initial studies on the frequency of the basic modes of communication, through the 1930's and 1940's, the emphasis in the listening research and literature was on attention, comprehension and retention.

The 1950's brought about a change in the emphasis placed on the teaching of listening. A large number of academicians and researchers began to engage in reasearch and writing on the subject of listening. Although empathic listening was usually ignored, references in journals and textbooks on listening techniques increased. Through the 1950's listening processes were viewed as reception of aural data, cognitive processing and recall of data. Input/output congruence was used to measure listening effectiveness and there was little if any emphasis placed on the interpersonal experience which was the environment for that input/output. Instead, the focus was on information, recall, facts and explicit content of messages. (Weaver) As Arnett and Nakagawa state, "the predominant theoretical/research focus in speech communication literature has been the examination of `comprehensive' listening (listening for understanding of central ideas, principles, themes) and `critical' listening (listening to persuasive messages), both of which are applied primarily in public speaking and mass media contexts." (Arnett, p. 368)

A gradual change became evident in the listening literature beginning in the 1950's and gained momentum in the 1960's: the concept of "speech" was gradually supplanted by the concept of the "communication process."

Theories of counseling and psychotherapy provided the framework for the concept of active listening. In 1955, Carl Rogers coined the term "active listening" to describe the facilitative function of listening with empathy. Extensive research and test construction in humanistic psychology stressed the salience of empathy. Carl Rogers is generally credited as the "originator of the concept of empathic listening." (Wolff, p. 65) It was Rogers' view that an "empathic understanding" was one of the three fundamental characteristics of the elping relationship and of a healthy interpersonal relationship. (Rogers, 1970, p. 192) He saw perception of the "internal frame of reference" of another with accuracy as the heart of Rogerian empathy. (Rogers, 1957, pp. 95-103)

Out of its interdisciplinary roots listening has finally emerged as a recognized component in the interpersonal communication and empathic listening is a vital part of this process. As Howell states: "It is inconceivable that a communication between two people could attain high quality without empathic responses of one or both participants." (Howell, P. 106) Most current listening listerature now recognizes the key element of empathy in the listening process. Several listening scholars view empathic listening as one of the major forms of listening. (Thomlison, p. 60)

Empathic Listening Education

"Feeling with" another is the heart of empathic listening. It includes a cognitive understanding of what the other is communicating plus a sensitivity to their state of emotion. It must include recognition and acknowledgement of our communication partner's feelings--recognition alone is a necessary but not sufficient condition of empathic listening. Wolvin and Coakley make the point that empathy is facilitated when the sender and listener have shared similar experiences and feelings. (Wolvin, p. 256) However, empathic listening is still possible even if a person does not have a parallel or shared experience. This is possible because empathy functions at a cognitive as well as an emotional level. So even if an individual has not had a similar experiential event in their life they can cognitively interpret the verbal and nonverbal cues of the speaker by relating these data to their own world of emotions and experience.

Empathic listening can be taught and unlike some communication skills in which effectiveness is correlated with degree of communicator confidence, one research study actually found that "individuals who were able to understand the emotional meaning of spoken messages tended to be those who were less rather than more confident." (Clark, p. 244) This implies that the teaching/training of empathic listening may even serve to boost the esteem and confidence levels of students who traditionally do not excell at standard "speech" education because of their communication apprehension. This hypothesis should be researched because of its ramifications for redesigning the basic public speaking course. Perhaps listening could be taught in the first portion of the course to increase the esteem and confidence of the students before moving into the more formal "oral presentation" part of the class.

Research supports the assertion that listening is the most important communication skill for interpersonal relationships. For example, a recent study in the health professions found listening to be the most important factor in effective communication. (Honeycutt, p. 225) Another study discovered that as little as six hours of training on active listening resulted in significant increases in skill levels. The authors concluded: "This finding suggests that active listening skills can be increased significantly through short-term training given as a part of inservice, continuing education, or formal educational programs." (Olson, p. 107) This study involved registered nurses and defined active listening as "the skill of understanding what your patient is saying and feeling and communicating to your patient in your own words what you think he is saying and feeling." (Olson, p. 104)

An Approach to Teaching Empathic Listening

One possible approach to utilize in the teaching of empathic listening is to begin a general unit on "Communication and Feelings." There are many ways to develop this theme so that students/trainees become aware of the role of emotions in the communication process as a whole. Here are some suggestions to stimulate your creative thinking on designing a unit for the purpose of teaching empathic listening.

(1.) Getting In-Touch: Before a person can truly empathize with another person they must become aware of their own emotional framework since it will provide insights about their partner's emotional world. Exercises which encourage students to acknowledge their own present feelings and verbally label them as specifically as possible is a productive starting point. This can be done through small group discussions on current controversial topics where they are encouraged to share their thoughts and feelings about the selected issue.

(2.) Develop exercises which push them to locate the "feeling source." That is, the person or event which triggered their present feelings. One exercise for this purpose would be to discuss a popular movie and encourage participants to tell what events in the film generated the feelings they had about the movie. Another approach is to have small group exercises in which students talk about something that they especially like or dislike--this will lead to several emotions being directly and indirectly expressed. The other members of the group are instructed to ask what caused the feelings of others so that all become more aware of feeling sources. The instructor can point out that once we know the feeling source we are in a better position to deal with them and even develop solutions to interpersonal problems in many cases. The instructor will also want to give some examples of his or her feeling sources and will remind the group that we generally do not have just one feeling at a time. Levels of feelings and feelings about feelings should be discussed to give the class a better understanding of how feelings work.

(3.) During these exercises the instructor should attempt to make several important points about feelings so the students are more aware of their own emotional reactions. A few sample questions might be:

A. What did it feel like to be experiencing that emotion?
B. What nonverbal clues did you give that you were feeling that way?
C. Were you able to precisely label the feeling? (That is, was your "feeling word" vocabulary sufficient?)

(4.) Be sure to provide the students with some basic guidelines about the nature of emotions. I call these "feeling guidelines." For example:

A. EMOTIONS SERVE AS A MONITORING SYSTEM. When we feel comfortable, relaxed, happy, involved, playful, affectionate, etc., our monitoring system tells us we feel safe, we feel comfortable being ourselves, we trust our partner, we feel free to change our point of view on an issue, and so on. When we feel fear, anxiety, anger, frustration, saddness, suspicion, etc., our monitoring system tells us that something needs to be clarified or understood, that we need more information, that other alternatives need to be examined, and so on. Thus, emotional awareness of self and others is a valuable system which supplies us with important intrapersonal and interpersonal information.

B. LOCATING THE FEELING SOURCE can help us determine whether the feeling target is ourself, someone else, something else, and whether or not we want to initiate some action because of that emotion. Exercises can be used to demonstrate this point by asking students during their discussions to clarify the feeling target. (You seem angry with your father; So you are proud of yourself for improving that math grade.) Often just locating the target of the fear, anger, etc. can provide potential solutions to deal with the difficulty constructively.

C. FEELINGS ARE NOT GOOD OR BAD--THEY JUST ARE. Our Feelings have physiological, cognitive, verbal, and nonverbal manifestations. When we feel angry our bodies may have an increase in blood pressure, heart rate, secretion of adrenaline, and so forth. These reactions can be used by us to cognitively label what we are feeling. Feelings are therefore internal reactions and they are factual for the person experiencing them. They do exist. As such they are neither good or bad--they just are. This can lead to a discussion of about the the ways we act on our feelings.

D. FEELINGS ARE PRESENT IN ALL TRANSACTIONS--WORK ON LISTENING FOR THEM. Emotions are an inevitable part of our existence as human beings and communicators. It is part of our innate nature to "feel." They cannot be turned on and off like a light switch. They are always present in an interpersonal transaction. A simple exercise to help demonstrate this is to divide the class into dyads. Then ask them to designate a "listener" and a "speaker." The speaker talks about absolutely anything they want to talk about while the listener is asked to simply listen for what the speaker is presently feeling as they talk. When the speaker is finished, the listener simply says "You feel _____." (filling in a present tense feeling they are picking up from the speaker) This exercise can lead to a discussion of the layers of feelings, feelings about other feelings (I feel guilty that I am angry), and multiple emotions.

E. RECOGNIZE IT IS THE WAY WE THINK THAT RESULTS IN FEELINGS. Albert Ellis states in his theory of rational-emotive therapy that it is what we are thinking which causes us to have a particular emotion instead of a different one. (Ellis) First, an activating stimulus is present. This could be some behavior performed by our communication partner, an event, a situation, a behavior of our own, and so on. Second, we have a belief about this stimulus which may be rational or irrational. Third, we will have some emotional reaction based on how

we are thinking about the stimulus. Instead of placing blame on the stimulus, we need to recognize that how we think about the stimulus determines our emotional reactions. Many exercises can be devised to illustrate this concept. For example, ask students to tell about something that made them happy or sad or angry, etc. Ask them to isolate the assumptions they were operating under regarding the situation. These may include "should statements" such as: "He should have known better than to do that," or "I should have tried another way," or "They should have been more considerate of my feelings." The situation can easily be diagramed on the board to illustrate the three parts of the Ellis model. By replacing the second stage with several different assumptions which are written on the board it is easy to show how the resulting emotion could have been different depending on which set of assumptions are made. Also, lists of common irrational assumptions can be easily generated by groups or the class as a whole.

F. OWN AND TRUST YOUR FEELINGS. Here you can discuss the difference between "I messages" and "You messages". (I am angry VS You made me angry) This can lead to discussions about taking personal responsibility for our feelings and it works well with the material on recognizing that it is how we think that determines how we feel.

G. REPORT FEELINGS RATHER THAN ACTING THEM OUT OR HOLDING THEM IN. This can be tied to materials on feedback if so desired. Role plays can be used to demonstrate the same scene handled by (a) acting out feelings and (b) constructively reporting feelings. It is important to remind the students that "I feel" messages are more accurate than blame messages which attribute the generation of your feelings to others. The class can discuss when they have tried to deny feelings. The physical and emotional results can be pin pointed in most cases. For example, ulcers, headaches, depression, etc. It should also be emphasized that in most cases it is advisable to report feeling as close as possible to the time they were felt. Students can be instructed to observe how often people report past feeling as opposed to present feelings.

H. WE ALL NEED TO INCREASE OUR "FEELING WORD" VOCABULARY. The larger our vocabulary for emotions, the more specific we can be in recognizing and labeling the emotions of self and others. Saying we feel "good" is far from precise in most cases. It may be adequate in phatic communion (small talk) but not in empathic communication. Students can be required to develop their own list of feelings or a list can be provided for their study. Many exercises are possible for this feeling guideline. One approach is to read dialogue from a play or to role play little scenes and ask the class to quickly identify the specific emotion--let the students call out their choice of feeling words. Another exercise involves dyads closing their eyes and holding hands. The instructor names different emotions one at a time and the dyads attempt to silently portray the feelings named through their "hand dialogue" with their partner.

I. ACKNOWLEDGE THE CONTENT AND FEELINGS OF YOUR PARTNER. Since feelings are always present in us as well as our interpersonal partner, an empathic listener listens at two levels: (1) content and (2) feelings. Paraphrasing exercises can be used to give students practice in the combining of content and feelings. For example, students can be

be placed in groups of three. Conversations can be held on selected topics or on topics chosen by the students. During the conversations each participant must paraphrase the content of the speaker to the speaker's satisfaction. In the second round, they must reflect both content and a present tense feeling. In the third round, they reflect content, a present feeling, and its target. ("You're feeling disappointed with yourself because you didn't study much.") This can be followed by a forth round in which an action or desired action is added. ("You feel angry with Joe because he let you down and you want to tell him about your feelings but not lose his friendship.")

One written exercise which can bring a greater awareness of empathic listening is called a verbatim. The student selects a conversation in which they recently participated. The dialogue is written down as accurately as possible, almost as if it were a play script. Next, the student assesses the dialogue in light of the above "feeling guidelines" plus any other requested items such as rating the level of empathic listening. (Thomlison)

Exercises should progress very slowly from basic reflection of content ("You want to delay the meeting till Friday."), to relection of feelings ("You feel frustrated."), to blending of content and feelings ("You're frustrated because...."), to locating the feeling source and feeling target ("You feel angry with yourself because you failed the exam." or "Your are proud of him because...."). Personalizing content and feelings is practiced constantly during the sessions. Sessions can be videotaped and replayed to illustrate where empathic listening was accurate and inaccurate. The ultimate determinator of effective empathic response is the feedback from the speaker rather than what the instructor or anyone else thinks should have been the appropriate response. There is no substitute for consistent practice and application of empathic listening which means it should be given a fairly large section of a course rather than just a day or two whenever possible. (Thomlison)

Conclusion

Empathic listening must be presented as an integral part of the interpersonal communication process rather than in isolation. Otherwise, it will be viewed as simply a "technique" rather than as a major variable in the ongoing and complex creation of meaning. The above suggestions are really only the preliminary stage in the teaching of empathic listening. The primary stage would include selection of an empathic listening model, presentation of the model at the cognitive level, followed by consistent practice sessions designed to incorporate the newly developed listening/responding approach into the natural communication behaviors of the learner. This writer highly recommends the use of Robert Carkhuff's counseling and communication model. (Carkhuff) However, the unit described above will provide many opportunities to creatively teach empathic listening and to synergistically combine it with other communication theory in order to integrate listening into the overall interpersonal communication model.

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